

*William  
Butler  
Yeats's  
Search for  
a Spiritual  
Philosophy*



SUHEIL BUSHRUI



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FOR A SPIRITUAL PHILOSOPHY





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*For*

Sir Nicholas and Lady Pearson

*In grateful recognition of their exemplary record  
of outstanding service nobly rendered in promoting the ideals  
and values of the Temenos Academy*



## INTRODUCTION

MY PASSION FOR Yeats began some 30 years ago, under the guidance of F.T. Prince, whose disciple I still remain. Since the early 1960s I have been deeply committed to the dissemination of Yeats's poetry and thought to the Arabic-speaking world – a Herculean task, but also a labour of love. I like to think that Yeats would have approved of my motives, whatever he might have thought of my achievement. If justification is demanded, I would claim that, important though the 'Irishness' of Yeats most certainly is, he is so much more than an Irish poet. Few great writers have sought wisdom from so many races and cultures. Could it not be argued that modern post-Christian, materialistic, even atheistic critics – whose aim, I sometimes think, is to denigrate rather than understand – are ill-equipped to appreciate the values which inspired Yeats the poet and Yeats the man?

I believe Yeats is uniquely able to appeal to readers of all nationalities and of all faiths. The global destruction which he foresaw has become a real and frightening possibility; if the forces of destruction are not to prevail in the world, the future will need, more than ever, the creative force which informs the life and work of William Butler Yeats.

Yeats saw that it was not enough to be a European – or an Asian or an Arab. I shall consider his world-wide search for a spiritual philosophy, in the context, specifically, of his assimilation of ideas and images from the East. It is appropriate that the plea for understanding and sympathy between all races and all creeds which is implicit in that search should be made in India, an ancient land which meant so much to him throughout his long life, a country which he was able to visit only in spirit.

I shall deal first, and at length, with Yeats's life-long fascination with the literature and philosophy of India, since this is perhaps the most significant and far-reaching of the 'alien' influences on his intellectual and artistic life. I shall follow this with a consideration of the very different, yet complementary, influence of Arab culture, which throws light not only on Yeats the poet and dramatist but also on the sensual and spiritual development of Yeats himself.

I shall first examine Yeats's assimilation of ideas and images from the East. When Yeats wrote 'most of us who are writing books in Ireland today have some kind of a spiritual philosophy' he was, of course, making a remark particularly relevant to himself. For Yeats, that personal philosophy underwent continuous formulation and re-formulation throughout his life. In the process, he drew not merely on the culture and philosophies of his native Ireland, though Ireland always remained a focal point on which other influences converged, but ranged widely through the cultural heritage of other nations for inspiration and ideas. As F.A.C. Wilson has appropriately observed,

...[Yeats] accepted the Christian revelation; but...he could not accept it as exclusive: the Upanishads, Buddhism, the religion of Platonism, the Jewish Kabbala and the Neoplatonic tradition of alchemy (of all of which he made himself a student) seemed to him also meaningful and valid; and he finished with a philosophy that would enable him to connect all these traditions, and to concur with Blake's maxim that 'all religions are one'.

As he was entering the world of the twentieth century, Yeats's statement about his religious beliefs was the most honest and open confession by any of the major poets of his time, and also the clearest statement on the spiritual vacuum that they experienced:

I was unlike others of my generation in one thing only. I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their



first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. I wished for a world where I could discover this tradition perpetually...<sup>2</sup>

That Yeats should have turned to the East in his search for a personal philosophy is hardly surprising. Living at the end of a period that had opened up the East to Europe in a way unparalleled since the decline of Venice as a sea power, the retreat of the Moors from Sicily and Spain, and writing at the end of an age of Romanticism that had itself turned to the East, his interest in cultures so much more long-standing than his own was almost inevitable. Ever since the British had become a colonial power in India, there had been a marked interest in the East and its religions, and a movement to bring its literary classics to the attention of the continental and English-speaking readers and literati. *The Arabian Nights* had been available to English readers since the beginning of the eighteenth century, and the writings and research of Sir William Jones publicized the treasures of classical India and ancient Arabia throughout the literary circles where English was the medium of civilized expression. The works of those Romantics in whose lee Yeats was writing – Shelley, Byron, Southey, Tennyson and Browning among others – show the influence of Arabic and Persian poetry, *The Arabian Nights*, and the Indian Sanskrit classics. In Yeats's own lifetime the influence had spread to English music, a trend which is epitomized in the works of Holst.

Two of the most formative influences on Victorian Literature – Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold – had moreover imbibed the new spirit of the meeting of East and West from the European movement which was probably most influential in bringing oriental modes of thought to the West – the German poets and philosophers in reaction to the *Aufklärung* (the Enlightenment). Goethe was the profoundly influential figure for Carlyle and Arnold: the universal genius who, inspired by the Persian poet Hafiz, had announced at the beginning of the nineteenth century the gospel of cultural universalism:



God's very own the Orient!  
God's very own the Occident!  
The North land and the Southern land  
Rest in the quiet of His hand.<sup>3</sup>

In the late 1820s and early 1830s, in introducing German literature and ideas to Britain, Carlyle had celebrated the German cultural renaissance as the sign of a coming new era. German transcendentalism was, of course, steeped in the philosophy of India – August Schlegel, for one, had promoted it through his translations of the Sanskrit classics.

However, it was the Arabian influence which stirred Carlyle to deliver his epoch-making lecture on Mohammed in 1840. His favourable approach to the Near East was repeated by Arnold in his appreciative writings on Islam, such as his *Persian Passion Play*. Carlyle and Arnold, both perceiving the emptiness of the Western secular society, looked back to past eras of faith, Carlyle to the Middle Ages and the Islamic world, Arnold to the East which in the day of a decaying Classical West, had announced a new millennium:

The East bow'd low before the blast  
In patient, deep disdain;  
She let the legions thunder past,  
And plunged in thought again.

So well she mused, a morning broke  
Across her spirit grey;  
A conquering, new-born joy awoke,  
And fill'd her life with day.

(from 'Obermann Once More')<sup>4</sup>

The great Victorians took, nevertheless, very little of substance from Eastern sources in order to found a new spiritual philosophy that might fill the spiritual gap left by a materialist, scientific, secular age. Carlyle, Arnold and Ruskin, each in their own way, were concerned to rediscover the ethical motivation of a Christianity shorn of dogma. This may be partly attributed to the fact that until the last two decades of the century, it was Westerners who mediated at second-hand Eastern

culture to their contemporaries. It was not until 1893, at the first session of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, that Vivekananda, in Professor Zaehner's words, was 'for the first time...able to present Hinduism to the world as a universal faith'. Western society, for well over two centuries missionary to the world with its developing technological 'know-how' and its own ethnic version of Christianity, was not to be susceptible to direct missionary contact from the East. The roles had changed, and it is in this context that we should view Yeats's own contact with figures like Chatterjee, Tagore, Madame Blavatsky, and Shri Purohit Swami.



## THE LORE OF INDIA

YEATS'S INTEREST IN the East started early in his career. His first contact with Eastern literature was as early as 1884,<sup>1</sup> when he and his fellow students at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin, AE (George Russell) and Charles Johnston, began reading the sacred literature of India.<sup>2</sup> In England, the Pre-Raphaelites had picked up the Eastern vogue, tending to look upon the East as a place in which life remained idyllic, mysterious, and graceful, much as Yeats describes it in 'The Indian to His Love', one of his earliest poems to show the Eastern influence. Since the 1850s, in fact, a great number of books had been published on the East. This was particularly so in the case of Arabia,<sup>3</sup> and the whole process continued up to the middle 1920s. Although Yeats had access to and read many works dealing with Eastern subjects as varied as religion, linguistics, literature and history, his reading was generally confined to the Indian sacred literature, some Indian poetry and plays, some Persian and Arabic poetry and tales; and to some Chinese and Japanese poetry and Japanese drama.<sup>4</sup>

The young poet's interest in the East, initially influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites, had a fundamentally different motivation. In *Autobiographies*, he explains that he had tired of the religion of Huxley and Tyndall, and that he wished to find a creed in which 'emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians'.<sup>5</sup> Yeats desired an explanation of man's role in the universe that would not be found in the Irish tradition, and was inadequately expressed by rationalistic philosophies or tradition-bound religions.



Consequently, he turned to the East as a source of the occult and the mystical, which he could assimilate into a personal creed.

In doing so, he was continuing the tradition of Romanticism: while studying Eastern myth and religion, he adapted the symbols and ideas that he discovered to his own metaphysic. Yeats's logic in turning to the East as a source of metaphysic lay with his conception that it was a place where the fundamental truths of life were still accessible. Thus, for example, Egypt (which merged in his mind with mysterious Arabia) is described as 'a symbol of the natural state'.<sup>6</sup> He speaks of the thirteenth-century Christian Cabbalists, who gave the geometric form to the tree of life, as being 'touched by the mathematical genius of Arabia'.<sup>7</sup> When he speaks of the ideal 'player' in *Samhain*, in 1906, he invokes the East:

We are not mysterious to one another; we can come from far off and yet be no better than our neighbours. We are no longer like those Egyptian birds that flew out of Arabia, their claws full of spices...<sup>8</sup>

Or, as he comments in *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*:

I have found myself thinking of players who needed perhaps but to unroll a mat in some Eastern garden...I love all the arts that can still remind me of their origin among the common people, and my ears are only comfortable when the singer sings as if mere speech had taken fire, when he appears to have passed into song almost imperceptibly.<sup>9</sup>

He even quotes John O'Leary on truth as saying:

I have but one religion, the old Persian: to bend the bow and tell the truth.<sup>10</sup>

The East, then, was for Yeats a source of the occult, the mystical, and the basic truths of life. The belief that he could integrate them into his metaphysic, and with the traditions and the culture of his native Ireland, was reinforced for him by the theories of Sir John Rhys, published in 1888, which suggested that the original home of the Celts as well as the other Indo-European tribes was in Arabia.<sup>11</sup>

In 1885, already, with George Russell, a confirmed mystic, and with Johnston, Yeats had read Max Müller's series, *The Sacred Books of the East*, which included the *Buddhist Sutras*, *The Bhagawat Gita*,<sup>12</sup> and the *Upanishads*. Russell was, at this time, regularly practising a form of meditation, which Yeats began and continued for many years.<sup>13</sup> Claiming that he had learnt it from McGregor Mathers, one of the founders of The Order of The Golden Dawn, Yeats described it as:

...a form of meditation that has perhaps been the intellectual chief influence on my life up to perhaps my fortieth year.<sup>14</sup>

Their interest in Eastern philosophy prompted Johnston and Yeats to found the Dublin Hermetic Society in 1885, with the purpose of studying mysticism, in particular that of Eastern and Indian religions. While Johnston was already a Theosophist, Yeats was prompted to investigate the occult aspects rather out of intellectual curiosity than from a desire for any form of religious illumination. As he read the philosophies and literature of the East, he noted the forms, techniques and metaphors that he could put to use in his own work, and eventually went so far as to adopt the Japanese Noh form for his dance plays.

It was in 1885 that Yeats first made actual direct contact with the East. Mohini Chatterjee, the young Indian mystic, was making a visit to Dublin. He had been sent there by Helena Blavatsky, the controversial founder of the Theosophical Society, then a resident in London.<sup>15</sup> There he lectured on Vedantic thought and discussed the concepts of re-incarnation and the pantheistic God as a divine over-self, who could be known through turning within oneself in contemplation. Essentially Chatterjee emphasized that the only life of real value was the one of mystical contemplation, or to use Yeats's expression, 'reverie'. The daily world was an illusion because of its temporary, or temporal, nature, and action was to be shunned.<sup>16</sup> Yeats's poetry over the next three years shows the influence of Indian culture and of Chatterjee's teachings. It was in all probability under the tutelage of Chatterjee that Yeats read Sanskrit drama. When lecturing to Indian students in Oxford in 1919, Yeats remarked that:



At one period of his literary career he had tried to steep himself in translations of the Sanskrit plays and to assimilate in his writings whatever seemed valuable and congenial.<sup>17</sup>

In *Mosada* (1886) there are two significant influences, one Arabian, the other Indian. The Arabian influence is inherent in the name of the heroine of the title and the allusion to her magical heritage ('Azolar,/The star-taught Moor') – she invokes, by virtue of being a Saracen, these magical powers as she burns:

...precious herbs, whose smoke  
Pours up and floats in fragrance round my head  
In coil on coil of azure.<sup>18</sup>

The Indian influence, however, is seen in the reference to the sultry palaces of Ind and the symbolic lotus flower:

Ah! now I'm Eastern-hearted once again,  
And, while they gather round my beckoning arms,  
I'll sing the songs the dusky lovers sing,  
Wandering in sultry palaces of Ind,  
A lotus in their hands...<sup>19</sup>

Yeats was apparently unconcerned about fusing Arab and Indian references, since both represented mysterious cultures. Bachchan has suggested the possibility that Yeats may have read Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*, as in the Sanskrit play one lover fans the other with a lotus flower.<sup>20</sup> If in *Mosada* the connection is tenuous, a stronger case can be made for Kalidasa's influence in 'Anashuya and Vijaya', one of a series of Indian poems written between 1886 and 1887.<sup>21</sup> In this poem, Yeats apparently adapted phrases from the translation of *Sakuntala* by Monier Williams (1853),<sup>22</sup> where Anashuya is the name of a character in the play.<sup>23</sup> Yet even in Yeats's poem, as Bachchan has shown,<sup>24</sup> the Indian elements are still distorted by the Westerner's idealization of the East.

But it was the influence of Chatterjee's teachings on Yeats's thinking rather than his reading up to then that made the greatest impact. In 'The Seeker' (1885),<sup>25</sup> the knight – the seeker of the title – has been searching



for an esoteric wisdom, through many lands and through the East:

Where spice-isles nestle on the star-trod seas,  
...and by the weedy marge  
Of Asian rivers, rolling on in light.<sup>26</sup>

What the old knight is seeking is esoteric and ascetic enlightenment – the ultimate attainment of life according to Mohini Chatterjee, who made Yeats feel that all action and all words that lead to action were a little vulgar, a little trivial.<sup>27</sup>

Yet neither the knight, who imagined wisdom as a beautiful woman, nor Yeats, could accept that renunciation of beauty as perceived by the senses should be necessary to self-knowledge.

Still, Chatterjee's philosophy of non-action appears again in another of Yeats's 1885 poems, 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd':

Then nowise worship dusty deeds,  
Nor seek, for this is also sooth,  
To hunger fiercely after truth,  
Lest all thy toiling only breeds  
New dreams, new dreams; there is no truth  
Saving in thine own heart.<sup>28</sup>

Yeats's ultimate adaptation of Chatterjee's idea that life is fundamentally an interior quest appears in 'The Shadowy Waters'.<sup>29</sup> In the poem Yeats's Irish background and his Indian interests are directly combined: the poem is set against a backdrop of Celtic mythology and concerns the quest for an island paradise in the West, but the ideas are essentially Indian. The hero, Forgael, voyaging westward, is seeking an ultimate knowledge of love which is metaphysical rather than physical in nature, and not even Dectora can fulfill his dream. Whether the poem is one of Celtic twilight or Indian influence is a moot point, but it does contain Indian symbols. The three dogs on Forgael's sail probably represent the three *gunas*. Furthermore, Forgael's search, based on the assumption that this present life is less valuable than that which can be found in some unknown Paradise in the West, is basically a variation of the Vedantic idea that life is an illusion or *Maya*. Guha suggests that the

poem contains several ideas of Indian origin: the sailors represent the *tamasic* life, and there is a parallel between Indian ideas of re-incarnation and Forgael's discussion of re-incarnation with Dectora. Guha's conclusion is that Forgael's search for perfection in love is unrealized,<sup>30</sup> for Yeats was familiar with the Tantric symbolism – the representation of sexual union between self and absolute self, and of the other opposites in life.

If 'The Shadowy Waters' represents the most complex absorption of Chatterjee's philosophy in Yeats's work, the Indian poems most obviously show the assimilation of Indian images. They were originally intended to be part of a collection, *The Book of Kauri the Indian*,<sup>31</sup> and show the influence of other Indian concepts that Chatterjee had discussed in Dublin. 'The Indian upon God' presents the concept of God in the *Rig Veda*.<sup>32</sup> In the poem, each animal and man sees God in his own form. For the roebuck, God is:

The Stamper of the Skies,  
He is a gentle roebuck; for how else, I pray, could He  
Conceive a thing so sad and soft, a gentle thing like me?<sup>33</sup>

Both the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Rig Veda* present God, or the divine consciousness, as a unique entity which has many forms of expression, and which may be perceived variously and with equal validity, and it is this concept that Yeats had utilized for his own poetry.

'Kanva on Himself' deals with the concept of re-incarnation, and approximates to words that Yeats heard directly from Chatterjee. Yeats said that:

Somebody asked him (Mohini Chatterjee) if we should pray, but even prayer was too full of hope, of desire, of life, to have any part in that acquiescence that was his beginning of wisdom, and he answered that one should say, before sleeping: 'I have lived many lives, I have been a slave and a prince. Many a beloved has sat upon my knees, and I have sat upon the knees of many a beloved. Everything that has been shall be again'.<sup>34</sup>



In Yeats's poem, this became:

Now wherefore hast thou tears innumerable?  
Hast thou not known all sorrow and delight  
Wandering of yore in forests rumorously,  
Beneath the flaming eyeballs of the night,

And as a slave been wakeful in the halls  
Of Rajas and Maharajas beyond number?  
Hast thou not ruled among the gilded walls?  
Hast thou not known a Raja's dreamless slumber?

Hast thou not sat of yore upon the knees  
Of myriads of beloveds, and on thine  
Have not a myriad swayed below strange trees  
In other lives?...<sup>35</sup>

A similar idea is presented in the later poem 'Fergus and the Druid', first published (in *The National Observer*) in May, 1892.<sup>36</sup> Fergus, desiring knowledge of the ultimate, seeks out the Druid in the forest; the Druid presents him with a bag of dreams, and when the Druid opens it, Fergus has a vision of his past lives:

I see my life go drifting like a river  
From change to change; I have been many things—  
A green drop in the surge, a gleam of light  
Upon a sword, a fir-tree on a hill,  
An old slave grinding at a heavy quern,  
A king sitting upon a chair of gold—  
And all these things were wonderful and great;  
But now I have grown nothing, knowing all.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps it will also be correct to assume that Keats, one of Yeats's masters in the early years, had not failed to touch Fergus with something of that 'negative capability' which Yeats understood so well.

By the 1890s, Yeats had absorbed the powerful influence of Chatterjee into his other interests. Sir John Rhys's lectures, which had shown Yeats a potential connection between the East and the Irish, also suggested that



the ancient Irish believed in re-incarnation and transmigration of souls.<sup>38</sup> While the Irish concept of re-incarnation was not exactly that of the Hindu, Yeats saw its possibilities for his Celtic poem 'Fergus and the Druid'. Indeed, a later Celtic poem, 'He thinks of his Past Greatness when a part of the Constellations of Heaven' similarly lists past lives.

The gradual absorption of Indian teaching into the Celtic framework is evident in 'The Wanderings of Oisín', published in 1889.<sup>39</sup> The saga story is a straightforward adventure tale of Oisín's voyage and his sojourn on three fairy islands. Yeats has added to the story the notion that Oisín is seeking something better than that offered in the world of mortals. Even though the result appears Celtic rather than Indian, this idea of the quest for an ideal life and self-realization has echoes of Yeats's first reactions to Chatterjee and to Indian thought.

Although the poem appears Celtic to the reader, Yeats suggested, in a letter to Katherine Tynan,<sup>40</sup> that it contained hidden symbols which no one would recognize but himself. Guha is among those who divine in the poem hidden symbolism: namely, that the three islands, like the three dogs on Forgael's sail, represent the three *gunas*: the Island of the Living represents *sattva*; the Island of Victories represents *rajas*; and the Island of Fortune, *tamas*.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, Oisín prefers his real world of the vigorous Fenians, even though he finds they are long dead, and he further rejects St Patrick's suggestions of prayer and fasting. As Guha comments, Yeats could not himself accept the extreme asceticism of Vedantic philosophy as propounded by Chatterjee.<sup>42</sup> This was quite a shift from his original attitude in 'Quatrains and Aphorisms':

Long thou for nothing, neither sad nor gay;  
Long thou for nothing, neither night nor day;  
Not even 'I long to see thy longing over,'  
To the ever-longing and mournful spirit say.

The ghosts went by me with their lips apart  
From death's late languor as these lines I read  
On Brahma's gateway, 'They within have fed  
The soul upon the ashes of the heart.'<sup>43</sup>

Yeats was not yet ready to reduce his heart to ash in the ascetic kiln. Chatterjee had taught, after the teaching of Sankara, an eighth century Indian thinker, that in order to free oneself from cycles of re-incarnation, one must also free oneself from all desires associated with this world. Oisín rejects this, saying:

But now two things devour my life;  
The things that most of all I hate:  
Fasting and prayers.<sup>44</sup>

So, although the detachment from life which Chatterjee advocated seemed to have a certain amount of appeal for the young poet, it is clear that, as the Indian ideas became more absorbed into the Celtic framework, Yeats felt himself unable to subscribe to a central tenet of Chatterjee's philosophy – that the way to a personal fulfillment or self-realization lies in a total rejection of action.<sup>45</sup> After the first flush of enthusiasm, action becomes married to a quest for a mystical fulfillment; the knight in 'The Seeker' is, after all, seeking, and Oisín has to put to sea. In later years, Yeats himself rejected many of his early Indian-influenced works: the Indian cycle of poems was never finished, and those that were extant were not re-published.

In 1887, two years before the publication of *The Wanderings of Oisín*, the Yeats family moved to London. Inevitably, this move brought Yeats into contact with Helena Blavatsky. He joined the Theosophical Society that same year, and in 1888 became a member of the Esoteric Section of the Society, which focused its attention on psychic experiments.<sup>46</sup>

Helena Blavatsky had spent a number of years in India, where she had become familiar with Hindu philosophy in its various expressions: yogic, Vedantic, and Tantric. She had travelled widely through other countries of the East, and through the Americas, and had absorbed a truly phenomenal amount of information about folk customs, beliefs, superstitions, and religious practices. These she amalgamated into two books, *Isis Unveiled* (1887) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), which remain, regardless of scholarly opinion, a remarkable compendium of occult symbols, magic rites, and religious thought. On becoming an intimate of Helena Blavatsky, and visiting her regularly, Yeats became familiar with



her works, although it is unlikely that he read them from cover to cover.<sup>47</sup> Unavoidably, this new influence began to show in his work.

Some of the ideas he found in her books he adapted to his own indigenous cult of Celtic mysteries.<sup>48</sup> Others, of Indian origin, appeared in *A Vision*, and in his later poetry. His most notable borrowing was the concept of historical cycles of alternating light and dark,<sup>49</sup> which symbolized the constructive and destructive phases of creation.<sup>50</sup> The alternation of these cycles represented in Indian thought the exhalation and inhalation of Brahma, the universal creative consciousness. His concept of re-incarnation – that a soul has to go through *necessary* cycles before purification – can be found in the works of Helena Blavatsky.<sup>51</sup> Even his code name in the Golden Dawn, D.E.D.I. (*Demon est Deus Inversus*), was a section heading in *The Secret Doctrine*,<sup>52</sup> and later in *A Vision*.

Similarly, the concept of unity of being, which became a central theme in Yeats's later poetry, and in *A Vision*, was derived from a concept of Helena Blavatsky's: the idea of self and anti-self. This would be more accurately described in Indian thought as the idea of 'self' and 'Self' (the Universal Self), and while Yeats's concept differed from the Indian in some respects, the similarities are apparent:

In the subjective system of India the individual self, ...has a basic identity with the Absolute Self. And Yoga, which Yeats came to know with his association with the Theosophical Society, maintains that it is within man's power to attain unity with the Absolute Self. ...Personality in the Indian system is regarded as a mask, as if human beings are actors on the stage of life using the masks of their personalities to hide their real faces (namely, Absolute Self).<sup>53</sup>

In 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' (1927),<sup>54</sup> Yeats pointedly illustrated this dichotomy of self and Self. His interest in Yoga continued throughout his life.<sup>55</sup>

Yeats's second direct contact with India took place in 1912, when he met the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore.<sup>56</sup> Tagore had been educated in England, was of an upper-class background, and was already a successful poet in his own country, writing in Bengali. He had come to England for a personal visit, and had brought with him some trans-



lations of his poems. These translations were passed on in manuscript to Yeats, who reacted enthusiastically:

...these prose translations from Rabindranath Tagore have stirred my blood as nothing has for years...These lyrics...display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long.<sup>57</sup>

He was impressed by the deep emotion of Tagore's poetry, in which nature and God could exist side by side; he saw none of the ascetic abstractions of Mohini Chatterjee's thought.<sup>58</sup> His initial enthusiasm led him to help Tagore prepare an edition of translations, to which he wrote the introduction, and the selections were published as *Gitanjali* in 1912. The following year he arranged a production of Tagore's *The King of the Dark Chamber* in London, and of *The Post Office* at the Abbey Theatre.<sup>59</sup> In addition, his enthusiasm for Tagore was bolstered by their similar views on nationalism.

But though Yeats was helpful to Tagore when Tagore was the latest 'discovery' of literary circles, Yeats's enthusiasm quickly cooled when he thought he was interested in becoming an Indian poet publishing in English. Though mistaken in this, Yeats probably realized that Tagore was not the personality he had imagined him to be. As Bachchan points out:

Tagore has the calmness and serenity of the 'Hermits upon Mount Meru'; but Yeats has the rage and frenzy of Cuchulain fighting against the waves.<sup>60</sup>

Yeats discovered that Tagore's *Sadhana* was full of those very abstractions he was trying to avoid:

I have fed upon the philosophy of the *Upanishads* all my life, but there is an aspect of Tagore's mysticism that I dislike. I find an absence of tragedy in Indian poetry.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, if Yeats's inability to equate non-action with his metaphysic led him to become disenchanted with Chatterjee, a similar mistrust of Tagore's avoidance of sexuality disturbed him. Though Tagore briefly held Yeats's imagination during the years 1912-1914, he

showed very little interest in the Bengali poet after the first enthusiastic response had turned to disenchantment.<sup>62</sup> Yet Yeats's interest in Indian literature had been revived, and he read a number of books on Indian drama and poetry.<sup>63</sup>

Just as Chatterjee's ideas were to resurface in some of Yeats's later poetry, such as 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', and in the dedication of *A Vision* in 1925, so Tagore's ideas occasionally re-appeared. 'Owen Aherne and his Dancers', written a decade after their meeting, contains a direct allusion to Tagore's poetry. Yeats wrote:

Let the cage bird and the cage bird mate and the wild bird mate in  
the wild.<sup>64</sup>

Tagore's version in *The Gardener*, another translated collection of selected poems, reads:

The tame bird was in a cage, the free bird was in the forest,  
They met when the time came, it was decree of fate.<sup>65</sup>

Yeats's third direct contact with Indian thought took place in London in 1931, when he met Shri Purohit Swami.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, a few poems had included references to India or echoes of Indian thought, including 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' (1927), 'Mohini Chatterjee' (1928), 'For Anne Gregory' (1930), and 'The Choice' (1933).<sup>67</sup> In addition, Mrs Yeats had begun studying Sanskrit shortly after their marriage, a result of the continuing Far Eastern vogue, and of Yeats's own interest in India, especially after the success of Tagore's translations.

Yeats was pleasantly surprised to find that Shri Purohit Swami, unlike other Eastern philosophers, found a place for man's physical being in his philosophy. The meeting brought to the fore those ideas which Yeats had long been formulating – the parallels between Ireland and the Far East. Had not the Islamic civilization in the Near East, Buddha's teachings in India, and the monastic culture of a newly-Christian Ireland reached poetic and religious heights at the same period, the seventh to the tenth centuries? Just as the arrival of Christianity had created a cultural upsurge in Ireland, so the arrival of Islam in Arabia and Buddhism in India had caused a renaissance in those countries. In each



place a civilization based on pagan culture had been reformed into an amalgam of great vitality.<sup>68</sup>

Yeats felt that he had found in Shri Purohit Swami that part of Indian tradition which confirmed his own philosophies. He had

Come to equate unmodified traditional Hinduism with early Christian 'Irishry' and even compared Shri Purohit with his faith in miracles and supernatural to the ancient Irish (St) Cellach.<sup>69</sup>

Yeats urged the Indian to write his autobiography, for he felt that the West had ceased to have any personal contact with mystical experience, and that the Indian could best teach the West by relating his own experience rather than recounting the abstractions that Yeats had encountered in Tagore and Chatterjee.<sup>70</sup> For the Swami, as Yeats wrote in his introduction to the autobiography, the world was 'Part of the "Splendour of that Divine Being"'<sup>71</sup> – that is, man's physical being, for which Yeats had been trying to find a place.

While the influence of Shri Purohit on Yeats's poetry can be found in 'Supernatural Songs', 'Lapis Lazuli', 'Those Images', 'The Statues', 'The Man and the Echo', or 'Under Ben Bulbin', the most interesting result of Yeats's association with the Indian was their joint effort in translating and editing *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, the result of which appeared in 1937.<sup>72</sup> Yeats had read several other versions of the *Upanishads*, and the version the two produced was hardly a scholarly translation. The structure is heavily imprinted with Yeats's own stylistic idiosyncrasies; however, for the non-purist, the translation still makes inspiring reading.<sup>73</sup> For Yeats wished to create a version of the *Upanishads* which would not be a 'muddled muffle of distortion that froze belief';<sup>74</sup> in his Preface to the book he comments that, while he was no expert in Indian philosophy, he had always wished to see a translation of the *Upanishads* that was not full of

Latinized words, hyphenated words; ...polyglot phrases, sedentary distortions of unnatural English<sup>75</sup>

In undertaking the work, Yeats felt a poetical and philosophical satisfaction for:



Shree Purohit Swami and I offer to some young man seeking, like Shakespeare, Dante, Milton, vast sentiments and generalizations, the oldest philosophical compositions of the world, compositions, not writings, for they were sung long before they were written down.<sup>76</sup>

The bardic tradition of living poetry had always held more power for Yeats than the embalmed word, and he always held up the example of the bardic Ireland as the heroic Ireland. He continues:

It pleases me to fancy that when we turn towards the East, in or out of church, we are turning not less to the ancient west and north; the one fragment of pagan Irish philosophy come down, 'The Song of Amergin', seems Asiatic; that a system of thought like that of these books, though perhaps less perfectly organized, once overspread the world, as ours today; that our genuflections discover in that East something ancestral in ourselves, something we must bring into the light before we can appease a religious instinct that for the first time in our civilization demands the satisfaction of the whole man.<sup>77</sup>

Yeats also wrote two introductory essays with Shri Purohit. The first was *The Holy Mountain*, the story of a pilgrimage to Lake Manas and of initiation on Mount Kailas in Tibet, by Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, translated from the Marathi by Shri Purohit Swami (Faber and Faber, 1934).<sup>78</sup> The second was a short essay 'The Mandukya Upanishad', which appeared in *The Criterion* in 1935.<sup>79</sup> In this essay, Yeats discusses the stages of vision or illumination connected with the mantra Aum,<sup>80</sup> a variety of Yogic technical terms,<sup>81</sup> and the general concept of union with God by sexual means, as practised by the devotees of Tantric Yoga.<sup>82</sup>

Although Yeats was well versed in Yogic terminology and philosophy, his discussions with Shri Purohit were probably responsible for the alterations of the Thirteenth Cycle in the revised version of *A Vision* (1937).<sup>83</sup> The concept of the Thirteenth Cycle, as one of deliverance at either end of a life, although present in the Cabbala and Boehme, is particularly Hindu.<sup>84</sup> Though present in the first edition of *A Vision*, Yeats's concept of the great year of thousands of years was basically similar to the Hindu cycle, which also has its climax at the full moon.<sup>85</sup>

Yeats could have drawn the ideas for his cycles, as well as those on the life of the soul after death, from any or all of the multiple influences that were now affecting his work: his study of the *Upanishads*,<sup>86</sup> of Yoga, or Helena Blavatsky's teachings.

Shri Purohit Swami's influence on Yeats extended only as far as Yeats was prepared to accept. For, realizing death's approach through the recurring illness that forced him to spend his winters in the South of France, Yeats felt the need to make a more impersonal, universal statement. In a letter written in the summer of 1935, he wrote:

I want to plunge myself into impersonal poetry, to get rid of the bitterness, irritation and hatred, my work in Ireland has brought into my soul, I want to make a last song, sweet and exultant, a sort of European *Geeta*, or rather my *Geeta* not doctrine but song.<sup>87</sup>

Inevitably, works of this last period drew heavily on the Indian thought that he imbibed, with its themes of death and re-incarnation.

This tendency had already appeared in poems written before the letter quoted above. In 'Vacillation' the theme is man's constant choice between actions in this world (or *Karma*) and self-realization. 'Vacillation' shows those Indian influences: the first section contains ideas from *A Vision* which closely follow Yeats's translation of the section of the *Upanishads* titled 'Famous Debates in the Forest', or the *Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad*. The dialogue of Section VII resembles that of the *Katha Upanishad*,<sup>88</sup> in which Nachiketas converses with death. The poem 'Vacillation', however, opens with a broad statement based on the philosophy found in *A Vision*:

Between extremities  
Man runs his course;  
A brand, or flaming breath,  
Comes to destroy  
All those antinomies  
Of day and night;  
The body calls it death,



The heart remorse.  
But if these be right  
What is joy?<sup>89</sup>

In section VII, the theme of antinomies continues in a dialogue between the soul and the heart:

*The Soul.* Seek out reality, leave things that seem.  
*The Heart.* What, be a singer born and lack a theme?  
*The Soul.* Isaiah's coal, what more can man desire?  
*The Heart.* Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!  
*The Soul.* Look on that fire, salvation walks within.  
*The Heart.* What theme had Homer but original sin?<sup>90</sup>

There was thus still the tension between activity and desire, and passivity and renunciation. Yeats must be in conflict with the religious man who held:

Man should strip him of the body, as the arrow-maker strips the reed, that he may know Him as perpetual and pure; what can He be but perpetual and pure? Then Nachiketas having learnt from Death this knowledge, learnt the method of meditation, rose above desire and death, found God...<sup>91</sup>

The Eastern ability to bring these abstract principles into daily life was, perhaps, one of the attractions Eastern philosophy held for Yeats when he first met Chatterjee. As he records in *Memoirs*:

In Christianity what was philosophy in Eastern Asia became life – biography, drama... Was the *Bhagavad Gita* the 'scenario' from which the Gospels were made?<sup>92</sup>

But still, Yeats's desire for a philosophy which did not deny man's right to joy in physical being remains conspicuous in the same journal:

To keep these notes natural and useful to me in my life I must keep one note from leading on to another. To do that is to surrender oneself to literature. Every note must first have come as a casual



thought, then it will be my life. If Christ or Buddha or Socrates had written, they would have surrendered life for a logical process.<sup>93</sup>

Man's experiences, including the physical, in a supernatural state of consciousness are the subject of the 'Supernatural Songs'. These form the largest collection of his poems based on Indian thought, and were probably a result of the stimulation provided by his association with Shri Purohit. As the ideas of the East and the concepts of Ancient Ireland were now related in his mind, he chose to place Indian thoughts in the mouth of a worldly-wise monk, Ribh, in a newly-Christianized Ireland:

I said that for the moment I associated early Christian Ireland with India; Shri Purohit Swami, protected during his pilgrimage to a remote Himalayan shrine by a strange great dog that disappeared when danger was past, might have been that blessed Cellach who sang upon his deathbed of bird and beast; Bhagwan Shri Hamsa's pilgrimage to Mount Kailas, the legendary Meru, and to lake Manas Sarowa, suggested pilgrimages to Croagh Patrick and to Lough Derg. A famous philosopher believed that every civilization began, no matter what its geographical origin, with Asia...Saint Patrick must have found in Ireland, for he was not its first missionary, men whose Christianity had come from Egypt, and retained characteristics of those older faiths that have become so important to our invention.<sup>94</sup>

Ribh does not exclude sex as part of religious experience, and in this Yeats is expressing ideas fundamental to Tantric Yoga. But it is one of the fundamental concepts of Indian thought that man may find God by seeking within himself, as he himself is one of the many expressions of God's creation, or *Brahma*. God the creator thus creates more of himself; or 'Godhead on Godhead in sexual spasm begot/Godhead'.<sup>95</sup> The union of man and woman, and the union of man with God, are equivalent in certain respects because 'Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed'.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, only an ascetic's purification grants Ribh vision of the united lovers, Baile and Aillinn:

...these eyes,  
By water, herb and solitary prayer  
Made aquiline, are open to that light.<sup>97</sup>

The relationship between the various states of consciousness is expressed at the end of Ribh's visions in 'Meru', a result of the state of illumination known as *Turiya*,<sup>98</sup> as Bachchan elucidates. Yeats speaks of the states in his introduction to *The Holy Mountain* and *The Ten Principal Upanishads*:

...a woman's voice as it seemed, singing the Mandukya Upanishad's description of the four states of the soul: the waking state corresponding to the letter 'A', where physical objects are present; the dreaming state corresponding to the letter 'U', where mental objects are present; the state of dreamless sleep corresponding to the letter 'M', where all seems darkness to the soul, because all there is lost in Brahma, creator of mental and physical objects; the final state corresponding to the whole sacred word 'Aum', consciousness bound to no object, bliss bound to no aim, *Turiya*, pure personality.<sup>99</sup>

Yeats composed 'Meru' before the rest of 'Supernatural Songs', and commented:

a poem upon mount Meru came spontaneously, but philosophy is a dangerous theme...<sup>100</sup>

In *The Herne's Egg* (1938), these states, the products of Indian thought, are given symbolism in an Irish setting. The Indian symbol for the 'emancipated soul' (or solitary soul) is the swan or *Hamsa*, and the Herne is a variation of the swan symbol.<sup>101</sup> Yeats, in his notes to the play *Calvary*, said:

Certain birds, especially as I see things, such lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle and swan, are the natural symbols of subjectivity, especially when floating upon the wind or alighting upon some pool or river...<sup>102</sup>



Birds as a symbol of soul or self are frequent throughout Yeats's poetry; one needs only to cite the crane in 'The Three Beggars' (1913), the swan in 'Leda and the Swan', or the cattle birds in 'At Algeciras – A Meditation Upon Death' (1929).<sup>103</sup> While the herne in *The Herne's Egg* is a symbol of the individual's soul or self, The Great Herne is a symbol of the Universal Self. Similarly, the egg has an origin in Indian symbolism; 'Brahmand' is the Sanskrit word for 'the universe; literally, the egg of Brahma, the creator'.<sup>104</sup> Thus, possession of the egg could be understood as symbolic of a state of illumination; but to extend the analogy in terms of the play's symbolism, only the emancipated soul, *Hamsa* or herne, has a right to possess the egg, namely knowledge of the universe through illumination.

Yeats first came into contact with the egg as a symbol when an initiate of the Order of the Golden Dawn. The egg was one of the five Hindu *Tattwa* symbols which were given to initiates to meditate upon for the purpose of developing clairvoyance. These symbols included: a yellow earth-square, a blue air-disk, a silver water-crescent, a red fire-triangle, and the black egg of the spirit.<sup>105</sup>

The other Indian feature in *The Herne's Egg* is the theme of re-incarnation. In the play, Congal, King of Connacht, and Aedh, King of Tara, and their soldiers, decide to rob the priestess Attracta of her hernes' eggs for a banquet, as the herne's egg is considered a food for kings. There are, however, additional reasons for robbing her: as the virgin priestess who guards and cares for the hernity, she considers herself the bride of the Great Herne as the Catholic nun is considered the bride of Christ. They find her devotion to this abstraction an absurdity.

Congal says:

... Must old campaigners lack  
The one sole dish that takes their fancy,  
My cooks what might have proved their skill,  
Because a woman thinks that she  
Is promised or married to a bird?<sup>106</sup>

He philosophizes:

Women thrown into despair  
By the winter of their virginity  
Take its abominable snow,  
As boys take common snow, and make  
An image of god or bird or beast  
To feed their sensuality...<sup>107</sup>

In spite of their disgust with her belief, she replies: 'There is no reality but the Great Herne'.

The men decide that the only cure for her is to be raped by seven men. Thus they rob her, rape her, and feel well justified in their deeds. The justice rendered for their acts is that Congal, whose murder by a fool has long been predicted, is killed, and in time is re-incarnated as a donkey.

The idea of re-incarnation being justified by a person's actions in a previous life was a concept Yeats had first heard from Helena Blavatsky and Mohini Chatterjee, and is one variation of the concept of *Karma*. The questions of *Karma*<sup>108</sup> and rebirth are again raised in 'The Man and the Echo'.

'Man' says:

And all seems evil until I  
Sleepless would lie down and die.

*Echo*

Lie down and die.

*Man*

That were to shirk  
The spiritual intellect's great work.  
And shirk it in vain. There is no release  
In a bodkin or disease.  
Nor can there be work so great  
As that which cleans man's dirty slate.

...



And, all work done, dismisses all  
Out of intellect and sight  
And sinks at last into the night.  
*Echo*  
Into the night.<sup>109</sup>

Echo provides no answer to the question of whether man should rejoice in that 'great work' which would release him from his *karma*, and rebirth. Neither can man, merely mortal, arrive at an answer, for he can be distracted by a rabbit's cry.

'Under Ben Bulben' again raised the question of rebirth. If re-incarnation existed in Indian thought, it also appeared in pagan Irish thought, and in this poem it is set in its Irish context, but with an Indian slant. At Ben Bulben, another sacred mountain, the immortal Sidhe meet on horseback, rejoicing in the blissful knowledge that they have 'Completeness of their passions won'.<sup>110</sup> They have been released from the cycle of rebirth, but they also troop by as if to deliver a message:

Many times man lives and dies  
Between his two eternities,  
That of race and that of soul,  
And ancient Ireland knew it all.  
Whether man die in his bed  
Or the rifle knocks him dead,  
A brief parting from those dear  
Is the worst man has to fear.<sup>111</sup>

Yeats's acceptance of re-incarnation, first learned through Mohini Chatterjee, then later discovered in the Celtic tradition, and continually reinforced by his studies of occult and Eastern thought, permitted him to make an audacious statement in his epitaph addressed to those same Sidhe horse-men, the immortal heroes of ancient Ireland:

Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by!<sup>112</sup>

## JAPAN'S LITERARY FORMS AND RITUALS

A DIFFERENT EASTERN INFLUENCE – that of the Japanese Noh – has a more specialized and circumscribed place in Yeats's borrowings and absorptions from the East. While acting as Yeats's secretary, the poet Ezra Pound further introduced him to Eastern literature. Pound had discovered the genre through the works of Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), a considerable authority on Japanese and Chinese culture, whose posthumously published *Epochs of Japanese and Chinese Art* (1911), was instrumental in introducing Oriental art to the West.<sup>1</sup> Fenollosa's incomplete notes were entrusted upon his death to Ezra Pound as literary executor; the result was *'Noh' or Accomplishment*, which included a general essay on the Noh, and a number of somewhat inaccurate and truncated examples of Noh plays, which are as much characteristic of Pound as of Fenollosa. Pound himself dismisses them lightly in a letter dated January 1914, but also refers to Yeats's interest:

This present stuff ranks as re-creation. You'll find W.B.Y. also very keen on it.<sup>2</sup>

The style of Noh had partly arisen as an expression of the principles of Zen Buddhism, in which Art was seen to be the meeting point between man and nature, the 'mediator between temporal and spiritual being'.<sup>3</sup> Zen gave life to the world of object and form and held that the kingdom of spirit could only be formed out of the kingdom of matter, which gave it an openness and humanity that Yeats had found lacking in his earlier contact with Indian thought. The principles set out by Pound in his commentary to *'Noh' or Accomplishment* clearly provided Yeats with a



vehicle for his own personal philosophy: one that had absorbed some of the ideas of esoteric Buddhism through the Occult revival and the cult of Theosophy in the 1880s.<sup>4</sup> These principles may be summed up as follows:

1. That Noh is concerned with an intense emotion fixed upon idea and not personality; a service of life, not the analysis of a set problem.
2. That unity of image through repetition and variation brings focus and intensification to the emotion expressed.
3. That Noh is a complete art in which poetry is assisted by music, dance and mime in expressing intense emotion.<sup>5</sup>

The influence of the symbolism inherent in the Noh style – for example, the expression in a symbolic manner of the unity of matter and idea – is first evident among Yeats's works in *At the Hawk's Well*. The use of mask, dance and music as symbolic expressions of spiritual concepts (for example, when the water trickles out, Cuchulain's opportunity to assume supernatural power is lost), as well as the original choreography by the Japanese dancer Ito Michia, show the direct assimilation of expressionist ideas embodied in the Noh. The play's connection to the Celtic myth of Connla's Well allowed Yeats to continue to reconcile his Western ancestry with the East. In addition, as Taylor shows,<sup>6</sup> the play bears a strong resemblance to the *Kami No, Yoro* (*The Sustenance of Age*), which, although not included in *'Noh' or Accomplishment*, Yeats could have seen in manuscript form. Certain features are substantially altered or transformed, but others – such as the removal of the hero from the stage at the crucial moment – appear to have been directly borrowed.<sup>7</sup>

Further plot similarities and influences can be traced in all Yeats's dance-plays. *The Only Jealousy of Emer* is similar in plot outline to *Aoi no ue*,<sup>8</sup> *The Dreaming of the Bones* was inspired by *Nishikigi*,<sup>9</sup> and *Calvary* is based not only on Oscar Wilde's prose poem *The Doer of Good* but on *Kakitsubata*.<sup>10</sup> The later reawakening of Yeats's interest in the dance-play manifested itself in *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, *The Herne's Egg*, and *The Death of Cuchulain*, all of which contain features of various Noh plays. They appear to have been inspired by the dancer Ninette de Valois, by

the foundation of the Abbey School of Acting (September, 1927), and Ballet (November, 1927), and the resulting performance of his earlier dance-plays,<sup>11</sup> as well as the Festival Theatre production of the Pound-Fenellosa translation of *Nishikigi* in 1933.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the influence of the Noh theatre on Yeats's dance-plays differs substantially from the other Eastern influences. Although the process of assimilation was much the same, involving the use of certain aspects or ideas which suited Yeats's own philosophy (here extended also to form and the presentation of matter, as well as content), the original motivation was very different. For much of the Eastern influence is attributed in origin to Yeats's contact with Chatterjee, Tagore, and Madame Blavatsky, whereas the discovery of the Noh form merely released a vision of dramatic presentation which Yeats might arguably have evolved for himself. A similar form of symbolic expressionism was coincidentally apparent elsewhere at the time; for example, in the new school of design led by Craig and Appia, and in the experiments of the Russian theatre. That Yeats should have embraced some of the ideas of the Noh was partly due to the responsive chords struck in him by that form: the mythical nature of the Japanese stories, the concentration on a few contrasting characters themselves symbolic of contrasting ideas and concepts, the necessity for the drama to convey abstract ideas and emotions from courage to jealousy to love; all these were similar to concepts already in Yeats's mind. It is therefore hardly surprising that Yeats should have employed the methods developed over long tradition by the Japanese for the dramatic expression of basic concepts. The methods themselves show a divergence in detail: the use of masks, dancing, gesture, music and mime in the Noh is developed to such a degree that every nuance delivers its own message to a knowledgeable audience – while remaining as inexplicable to an unenlightened Westerner as the Japanese reverence for swords as art-objects. Most of Yeats's stylization, however, is readily intelligible: the masks to hide the character of the actors, so that the audience concentrates on the symbolic embodiment of an idea; the dance and mime as an expression of that idea, and a further distancing of the actor as a personality; and the music to reinforce the entire effect of distancing, and of leading the



audience through symbolic expressionism in the realm of idea rather than character. If Yeats uses certain features directly reminiscent of Noh actions – for example, the folding of the cloth to represent the curtain, the symbolic backcloth – it is to reinforce the concentration on idea rather than to create a language of symbolic gesture. In Noh drama the very stylization and the use of such symbolic language is an integral part of the Zen Buddhism it portrays – i.e. the form is an end in itself. In Yeats's plays for dancers the form is merely a vehicle for ideas which are taken from a variety of sources (other than the Noh); it is a means to an end.

Unfortunately, the 'alien' stylization, coupled with the lack of a discipline capable of founding a similar tradition to the Noh, has been largely responsible for the relative unpopularity of the dance-plays. Yeats himself wrote, in a note to *The Only Jealousy of Emer*:

In writing these little plays I knew that I was creating something which could only fully succeed in a civilization very unlike ours. I think they should be written for some country where all classes share in a half-mythological, half-philosophical folk-belief which the writer and his small audience lift into a new subtlety.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Yeats's plays had very little relevance to the lives and inclinations of his audience; the plays' idealism, occultism, and romantic metaphysics were irrelevant when World War I had put an end to the last vestiges of Victorian Romanticism. As Taylor observes, a romantic worldview was generally far more acceptable in poetry than on stage.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, although the Noh is the most widely recognized Eastern influence on Yeats, it is the least far-reaching, in the sense that it is primarily one of form and structure rather than content and idea; and the least successful in terms of audience reaction.

## ARABIA ROMANTICA

YEATS'S ATTENTION WAS not entirely focused on India and the Far East. After joining the Theosophical Society, and later MacGregor Mather's Order of the Golden Dawn, the Near East, or more appropriately, the Arab East, with its traditions of magic, astrology, numerology, the Tarot, and other forms of divination, became familiar to Yeats through the two societies. Whereas India had apparently been associated with an image of mystical serenity, the Arab East appeared in his poetry of this period as a land of magic and passion.

Images of the Arab East first appear in *Mosada* (1886). In *Rosa Alchemica* (1897), he wrote about Avicenna and al-Farabi, not as philosophers, but as magicians.<sup>1</sup> Thus in *Autobiographies* he tells how:

...a Professor of Oriental Languages at Trinity College, a Persian, came to our Society and talked of the magicians of the East. When he was a little boy, he had seen a vision in a pool of ink, a multitude of spirits singing in Arabic, 'Woe unto those that do not believe in us'.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Street Dancers* (1890), the passion he also associates with the Arab East is prominent:

Maybe now a Bedouin's brood,  
Laughing goes in wildest mood,  
Past the spears and palm-stems dry,  
Past the camel's dreaming eye.<sup>3</sup>



In *Rosa Alchemica*, *The Tables of the Law*, and *The Adoration of the Magi* (1897), the central figure, Michael Robartes, appears as the English traveller who has made mysterious discoveries and acquired esoteric knowledge among the Arabs.

Accounts of travels in Arabia were a popular form of literature throughout the nineteenth century, and in creating Robartes, Yeats was probably most influenced by Charles Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*,<sup>4</sup> and hints of the Robartes myth appeared in Yeats's unfinished novel *The Speckled Bird*.<sup>5</sup> As well as Doughty, Yeats read the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam before 1901,<sup>6</sup> and the poems *The Divan of Hafiz* by the Persian poet Mohammed Shams al-Din Hafiz between 1895 and 1906;<sup>7</sup> he was probably familiar too with *The Arabian Nights* before 1900, though he did not study it in detail until later. He refers to Hafiz in *Discoveries*,<sup>8</sup> a statement that is amplified in *Pages from a Diary* 1930, and which shows what the Arab East, as opposed to the Buddhist and Hindu East, meant to Yeats:

I cannot discover truth by logic unless that logic serve passion, and only then if the logic be ready to cut its own throat, tear out its own eyes – the cry of Hafiz, 'I made a bargain with that hair before the beginning of time', the cry of every lover...I must not talk to myself about 'the truth' nor call myself 'teacher' nor another 'pupil' – these things are abstract – but see myself set in a drama where I struggle to exalt and overcome concrete realities perceived not with mind only but as with the roots of my hair.<sup>9</sup>

In 1908 Yeats had an indirect contact with the Middle East, reminiscent of Sir John Rhys's theories.<sup>10</sup> A member of MacGregor Mather's Order of the Golden Dawn, Dr Felkin, made the claim that he had found:

'real Rosicrucians' in Germany; and acquired an Arab teacher, Arab Shemesh, supposedly from the Mesopotamian 'Temple in the Desert' of the 'Sons of Fire,' who told him that Christian Rosencreutz himself had come to their Temple and learned much, and that his own aim was to unite East and West.<sup>11</sup>

In 1911, Yeats found himself more directly – if more strangely – involved in the Arab world. At a séance in America, conducted by the medium Mrs Wreidt, he discovered that he had a ‘guide’, the North African Arab writer Al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Zayyati,<sup>12</sup> better known as Leo Johannes Africanus. Leo (1483–1554) was:

...born at Granada of a noble Moorish family and educated at Fez; ... he had travelled through the Sudan, Timbaktu, the Sahara Desert, the Niger Basin, Bornu, Lake Chad, Constantinople, Egypt, Arabia, Armenia and ‘Tartary’.<sup>13</sup>

Captured by pirates, he eventually arrived in Italy at the court of Pope Leo X, where he became a Christian and was baptized Johannes Leo de Medici. As an Arab scholar, he was well received. He

...taught Arabic at the Vatican and wrote the *Descrizione dell’Affrica*, an account of the lives of Arab physicians and philosophers, a Spanish-Arabic vocabulary and some poems.<sup>14</sup>

Yeats owned an English version of Leo’s book, *A Geographical Historie of Africa*, collected and translated by John Pory in 1600. Leo Africanus became his spiritual guide, a man with whom he shared certain similarities: he was a poet, a diplomat, and a man of learning, and yet his natural opposite in that he was a man of action and an adventurer. He symbolized the man Yeats was

...always trying to become. But it should be noted that this choice of an opposite was not totally removed from Yeats’s European background; the connection was established. Africanus had bridged the gap between two irreconcilable cultures and religions.<sup>15</sup>

Though the affinity with Leo Africanus is not much publicized by Yeats’s critics, this strange connection was instrumental in furthering Yeats’s interest in the Arab world; Yeats carried on an imaginary correspondence with Leo, and these unpublished papers are full of ‘images from Leo’s time, now in the desert, now in Rome’.<sup>16</sup>

The similarities between Arabia and Ireland did not escape Yeats’s notice. He accepted John Rhys’s theory that the home of the Celts might



have been in Asia,<sup>17</sup> and to Yeats this was the 'Semitic East,' the region that is often referred to as the 'fertile crescent' in the Arab world and does not include India or China.

He found Arabia, like Peasant Ireland, a strangely isolated country, living its own contracted life and remaining almost untouched by the influence of alien materialistic civilizations. He saw a parallel between pre-Islamic pagan Arabia and pre-Christian pagan Ireland... Yeats must have been struck also by the fact that poetry was to the Arabs something solemn and awful, approached only with a sense of profound responsibility: it was the creation by man of something which was more than human and also divine. This conception of poetry Yeats had already recognized in Celtic Ireland through his reading of Geoffrey Keating's bardic history of Ireland written around 1640. It is also striking that in or about the latter half of the sixth century A.D.—when the poet's voice is hardly heard throughout the rest of the world—both Arabic and Irish poetry reached an unparalleled degree of excellence. When most of the world was tongue-tied, Arabia and Ireland spoke with eloquence and beauty...<sup>18</sup>

If the London Societies and Leo Africanus had initiated Yeats's interest in the Arab world, and he followed T.E. Lawrence's exploits in Arabia from 1914 to 1916, the peak of his interest came with his marriage in 1917 to Georgie Hyde-Lees. Vedantic thought had provided no room for man's right to rejoice in his physical self, and when Yeats read Arthur Avalon's *The Principles of Tantra* in 1914,<sup>19</sup> in which one of the basic symbols of unity of being is the perfect union of man and woman, it had strengthened his long-held belief that asceticism and logic were not sufficient means to discover truth.

An important effect of his marriage was that it brought to his work an open and dignified sensuality. While Tantric Yoga and *The Arabian Nights* provided the intellectual setting for the development of sensuality in his work, Mrs Yeats, whom he described as 'a girl strikingly beautiful in a barbaric manner',<sup>20</sup> was the person through whom he discovered images of this new sexuality. The image of the Arab world was the perfect

background for these new discoveries, which were appropriately given an 'Arabian Nights' setting. Yeats regarded the frank treatment of sex in *The Arabian Nights* as healthy and natural, and would repeat his desire to write in the 'style of the *Arabian Nights*' later in life, as his poetry became less and less inhibited 'in speaking of those things which lie below our waists'.<sup>21</sup> To the philosophic poets of Arabia, sexual love was a symbol of divine love, and this appealed to Yeats, who believed that 'all the arts sprang from sexual love'.<sup>22</sup>

In 1917, Yeats published *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, which contained further amplification of the Robartes theme, but the immediate poetic result of his marriage was the poem 'The Gift of Harun al-Rashid', an autobiographical account of his bride's faculty for automatic writing. A few days after their marriage, she began to record an elaborate explanation of history and personality cycles 'dictated' to her by spirits calling themselves 'The Instructors'.<sup>23</sup> Yeats places this autobiographical fact into the Arabian setting of 'The Gift of Harun al-Rashid', which first appeared in 1924.<sup>24</sup> Kusta ben Luka sees his bride

...sitting upright on the bed;  
Or was it she that spoke or some great Djinn?  
I say that a Djinn spoke. A livelong hour  
She seemed the learned man and I the child;  
Truths without father came, truths that no book  
Of all the uncounted books that I have read,  
Nor thought out of her mind or mine begot,  
Self-born, high-born, and solitary truths,  
Those terrible implacable straight lines,  
Drawn through the wandering vegetative dream,  
Even those truths that when my bones are dust  
Must drive the Arabian host.<sup>25</sup>

The Caliph Harun al-Rashid, ruler of Baghdad (786-809 A.D.), is an historical figure who appears frequently in the *Arabian Nights*, along with his Vizir Jaffer. Kusta Ben Luka is also an historical figure, but, being born in 820 A.D., was not Harun al-Rashid's contemporary, as the poem would indicate. He was one of the greatest translators of the Iraqi



culture centered at the capital Harran and was at his productive height during the reign of the Caliph al-Mu'tamid (870-892 A.D.).<sup>26</sup> Yeats acknowledges this in *A Vision* (1925), and in his note to the poem, which is a delightful fabrication of fact and fantasy. He also links Kusta Ben Luka to Byzantium in the poem; to Yeats the Byzantium and the Baghdad of al-Rashid's time were complementary phases in human civilization's development. They symbolized the reconciliation between the antinomies, while 'at the same time they were the two greatest centres of human civilization'. Both cities became symbols of his ideal world.<sup>27</sup>

The Arab elements in 'The Gift of Harun al-Rashid' fall into two categories: those that appear to be borrowed from *The Arabian Nights*, and those that reflect more general Arabic concepts. Yeats, as he was to do throughout his life, had by now studied *The Arabian Nights*, and in his notes to the poem, he refers to *The Tale of the Yellow Youth*. Yeats's poem opens with the comment that the Prince Harun al-Rashid had hidden his depression since the execution of his Vizir Jaffer with a false elation. As a result, he apparently chose to marry another bride:

I have brought a slender bride into the house;  
You know the saying, 'Change the bride with the spring'.<sup>28</sup>

Yeats suggests that the reference to something new with which to lift the spirits is echoed by *The Tale of the Yellow Youth*, which opens with Harun al-Rashid, accompanied by his Vizir Jaffer, having left his palace in disguise during the night:

...for Jafar had told the Khalifah, who was suffering from  
sleeplessness and depression of spirit, that there was no better  
remedy for such weariness than seeing a new thing, hearing a new  
thing, and visiting a new place.<sup>29</sup>

From there, *The Tale of the Yellow Youth* digresses on other lines; but a similar section is to be found in *The Tale of Ala al Din Abu Shamal*.<sup>30</sup> In Yeats's poem, 'The Gift of Harun al-Rashid', we find echoes of this latter tale where Harun al-Rashid expresses his desire to share in the joy of a

new bride. In this latter tale, Harun al-Rashid says to the hero, on hearing a woman singing:

'My friend, I read in your eyes that this favourite of mine pleases you.' 'What pleases the master ought to please the slave', replied the youth.<sup>31</sup>

If Jaffer and Harun al-Rashid figure prominently throughout *The Arabian Nights*, there are other Arabic elements in the setting of 'The Gift of Harun al-Rashid'. Yeats notes in the opening verses, describing the Treasure House:

Where banners of the Caliphs hang, night-coloured  
But brilliant as the night's embroidery,<sup>32</sup>

that 'The banners of the Abbasid Caliphs were black as an act of mourning for those who had fallen in battle at the establishment of the Dynasty'.<sup>33</sup> No Arab home of any importance is without a fountain, so when Harun al-Rashid visits Kusta-ben-Luka, he

Sat down upon the fountain's marble edge,  
One hand amid the goldfish in the pool.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, the Arab setting is invoked in the Caliph's description of Kusta's garden:

...she and I, being sunk in happiness,  
Cannot endure to think that you [Kusta] tread these paths.  
When evening stirs the jasmine bough, and yet  
Are brideless,<sup>35</sup>

for

...the jasmine season warms our blood.<sup>36</sup>

The *Arabian Nights* and the Arabic setting provide the background to the poem; but the outstanding Arabic feature of 'The Gift of Harun al-Rashid' is the concept of the Djinn. Djinn appear throughout the *Arabian Nights* and in Doughy's *Arabia Deserta*, whence Yeats had drawn the character of



Robartes.<sup>37</sup> As has been seen, Yeats uses the image of a Djinn in the opening lines of the poem:

...was it she that spoke or some great Djinn?  
I say that a Djinn spoke.<sup>38</sup>

And later

...her mouth  
Murmured the wisdom of the desert Djinns.<sup>39</sup>

A bedouin would say that 'Kusta's bride is "Djinn-possessed"', or she is 'Daimon-possessed', as Yeats would have put it in reference to a poet. The Arabs believed that a poet's work is really the creation of his 'Daimon';<sup>40</sup> the Arabic word for Daimon literally means 'Devil of Poetry'. While Yeats would not necessarily have known this from Arab folk-belief, he himself would probably have interpreted being 'Djinn-possessed' as meaning that the voice from within was that of the higher self, Divine Consciousness.<sup>41</sup> He had fully developed this definition of 'Daimon' as man's higher self or soul, and its knowledge as 'Spirit,' by the *Vision* of 1937. But the use of the Djinn in 'The Gift of Harun al-Rashid' not only expressed the ideas of his hero, but was a poetical expression of the process of automatic writing practised by his wife.

The Djinn is a specifically Arab image. But one is reminded of another Arabic concept – the practice of sand divination, or the telling of the future by drawing lines in the sand. In 'The Gift of Harun al-Rashid', Kusta's bride rises in the night to walk in the desert where she 'marked out those emblems on the sand'.<sup>42</sup> Yeats may have read of the practice in Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*.<sup>43</sup> The geometric forms he speaks of are probably derived from MacGregor Mather's use of symbols to invoke images.<sup>44</sup> The multiple influences on Yeats merge; but at the end of the poem his exaltation at the mysterious wisdom of women reflects his new-found sensuality and its apparent expression in the Arab world:

A woman's beauty is a storm-tossed banner;  
Under it wisdom stands, and I alone –  
Of all Arabia's lovers I alone –

Nor dazzled by the embroidery, nor lost  
In the confusion of its night-dark folds,  
Can hear the armed man speak.<sup>45</sup>

The result of Yeats's work on the manuscripts of his wife's automatic writing was *A Vision*, published in a private limited edition in 1925. In this version, *A Vision* was divided into four parts: 'What the Caliph Partly Learned', finished at Thoor Ballylee in 1922; 'What Caliph Refused to Learn', written between 1922 and 1925; and 'Dove and Swan' and 'The Gates of Pluto'.<sup>46</sup> Whether or not one wishes to believe in the reality of automatic writing, or spirit guides, is a matter for personal choice or, perhaps, personal experience. Generally speaking, *A Vision* was an embarrassment to critics. Not only was its explanation of a world system and of personality types difficult to understand for people not versed in occult literature, but occultism, until recently, has been a skeleton kept firmly in the closet. The book was politely ignored, even though its systems provided explanations for the metaphors used in Yeats's later poetry.

Yeats attempted to give the work a plausible setting, and thus chose the common literary device of putting the main text within a framework. Michael Robartes, a doctor by profession, has returned to visit his friend, Owen Aherne, after travelling in Arabia for a number of years, and after acquiring that esoteric knowledge that lies at the heart of all truth. He tells of his trip to Mecca disguised as an Arab, his years spent among the desert Bedouins, and among the Judwali (or Diagrammatists) tribe. The Judwalis are a fiction; however, Yeats had gone to some trouble to make his fantasy appear credible. He had asked Sir Edward Denison Ross, an authority on Oriental languages and founder of the School of Oriental Languages at London University, for help in naming the tribe. Ross probably invented the word 'Judwali' for him; the Arabic word 'Jadwal' literally means a stream, canal, a mathematical table or diagram.<sup>47</sup> There is a Bedouin tribe in Iraq today called the Sabians, whose ancient religion was based on certain magical diagrams and astrological beliefs.<sup>48</sup> Yeats could have read of the Sabians in Lady Anne Blunt's *Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates*; <sup>49</sup> equally, he could



have been familiar with tribes and practices similar to the Judwalis from Madame Blavatsky's books.

For his invented tribe, Yeats invents a sacred book, said to have been lost, which contains all knowledge in the form of diagrams and other mathematical tables. Yeats gives the name of the book as *The Way of the Soul Between the Sun and the Moon*, though there is no Arab text with a title which resembles this. He may well have borrowed the idea from MacGregor Mathers, for the latter's Golden Dawn teachings included a diagram called 'The Pillars of the Sephiroth', showing the paths of the soul's spiritual development, one of which is the path of the arrow. On the diagram this path runs between the moon and the sun.<sup>50</sup> One is also reminded of the Irish tradition of Celtic numerological symbolism – in the Irish twig alphabet the first letter represented the pillars of Solomon.

Yeats's sensual flowering is expressed in *A Vision* and in two other poems of the same period that have their roots in *The Arabian Nights*: 'Solomon to Sheba' and 'Solomon and the Witch'.<sup>51</sup> Both Solomon and Sheba appear in *The Arabian Nights*, but in guises very different from the Biblical characters. Sheba is Queen of 'one of the greatest Arab dynasties' of the south-western extremity of the Arab peninsula, the Royal house of the Pre-Islamic Kingdom of Saba.<sup>52</sup> Solomon is more than the wise king, son of David; he is a romantic figure, a master magician with the power to command and converse with animals and insects, and with complete control of the Djinn. In Solomon all opposites are reconciled, above all the spiritual and physical. He is supreme in the natural and supernatural worlds,<sup>53</sup> and it is this tradition that Yeats directly borrows in 'Solomon and the Witch'. For Sheba, Solomon is a man

Who understood  
Whatever has been said, sighed, sung,  
Howled, miau-d, barked, brayed, belled,  
yelled, cried, crowed,<sup>54</sup>

Sheba is a sensual beauty; Solomon has 'kissed her dusky face',<sup>55</sup> and 'kissed her Arab eyes'.<sup>56</sup> The 'Arab lady' declares:

'Last night, where under the wild moon  
On grassy mattress I had laid me,  
Within my arms great Solomon,  
I suddenly cried out in a strange tongue  
Nor his, nor mine,'<sup>57</sup>

and finally exclaims:

'...the moon is wilder every minute.  
O! Solomon! Let us try again.'<sup>58</sup>

Aside from characterization and certain autobiographical elements, the unabashed sensuality of these poems is that of *The Arabian Nights*, and it is hardly surprising that Yeats chose an Arab setting for the poems that reflected his new phase in life. The vigour of these tales, as well as their magic and imagery, was well fitted to his subjective experience, and better suited to his purpose than any Irish or Indian background. The change in the sexual tone of his later poetry, although lacking Eastern elements, can be attributed both to his marriage and to the discoveries in *The Arabian Nights*. Solomon and Sheba become 'symbolical figures representing wisdom and passion, mind and heart, body and soul, the negative and the positive; but above all, the newly-married poet-philosopher and his young wife'.<sup>59</sup> 'Crazy Jane', the series 'A Woman Young and Old', 'The Three Bushes', 'The Lady's First Song', including her second and third 'songs', as well as 'The Lover's Song' and the chambermaid's two songs, would have been unthinkable for the Yeats whose qualities as a lover produced 'He Bids His Beloved Be at Peace', 'He Tells of a Valley Full of Lovers', and other love-poems in *The Wind Among the Reeds*.

Few of Yeats's works after 1925 contain Arab ingredients. 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931' and 'At Algeciras - A Meditation upon Death' contain allusions to the Arab world; in 'The Second Coming' the desert beast which slouches forth comes from *The Arabian Nights*: it is one of the 'Ifrits' or Djinnns which populate the Tales. Otherwise, only the plays *Calvary* (1920) and *The Cat and the Moon* (1926) reflect Arab elements. *Calvary* is Yeats's only play with a Near Eastern background; it contains



the desert imagery he had encountered in his reading, especially in Doughty's *Arabia Deserta* and *The Arabian Nights*.<sup>60</sup> Yeats, like Doughty, speaks of 'the great desert birds', solitary spirits which have been transformed into birds. In *The Tale of Kamar al-Zaman and the Princess Budur, Moon of Moons*, from *The Arabian Nights*, there is an outstanding example of spirits turned into birds. At the beginning of the tale, the good Djinn Maimunah transforms herself into a bird, and many other 'ifrit' later take the forms of birds, one leading the hero astray, while other birds of prey have symbolic meaning.<sup>61</sup>

*The Cat and the Moon* seems to have been based on the tale of *The Blind Man and the Cripple* in Sir Richard Burton's version of *The Arabian Nights*. The characters of the play – a blind man and a cripple – are the same two deformed characters found in the Arabic tale, and apparently have a parallel function. To Burton, the blind man represented 'the body which seeth not save by the spirit', and the cripple the soul 'which hath no power of motion but by the body'.<sup>62</sup> Though Yeats commented, when discussing the moral of his play in its introduction, that these characters existed in a 'mediaeval Irish sermon', he in fact followed closely Burton's explanation of the story.<sup>63</sup>

## CONCLUSION

SO MUCH, THEN, for the more apparent borrowings and echoes of Eastern subjects found in Yeats's work. Yet, while Indian thought and imagery, occult ideas, and Arabic themes are often easily spotted in Yeats's work, particularly in his early poems when these ideas first came to his attention, the profundity of his belief in these philosophies, for which one need only point to *A Vision* as evidence, soon eliminated obvious references to the East and they were assimilated as images and symbols. Two final examples show the extent of this assimilation – 'Lapis Lazuli' and 'The Statues'.

'Lapis Lazuli' appeared in the 'London Mercury' in March, 1938.<sup>1</sup> The poem implies that the only durable art is that created by those very persons who seem least concerned about life's tragedies and temporal nature. 'Hysterical women' complain of 'poets that are always gay', when poets should fear the coming war.<sup>2</sup> But, Yeats says, even the great figures of tragedy – Hamlet and Lear – are gay: 'Gaiety transfiguring all that dread'.<sup>3</sup> The reason for this apparent paradox is the cyclical nature of the universe, and its periods of light and dark, even at the level of the individual personality:

All men have aimed at, found and lost;  
Black out; Heaven blazing into the head;  
...  
All things fall and are built again,  
And those that build them again are gay.<sup>4</sup>

This statement of Yeats's version of the Great Year, or *Kalpa*, is set



against a description of a carved lapis lazuli panel on which 'Two Chinamen, behind them a third' carrying a musical instrument and a 'long-legged bird/A symbol of longevity'<sup>5</sup> are frozen in their climb among the panel's petrified cascades. One is reminded of Yeats's later mention of Oriental art in *The Holy Mountain*:

Much Chinese and Japanese painting is a celebration of mountains, and so sacred were those mountains that Japanese artists, down to the invention of the colour-print, constantly recomposed the characters of Chinese mountain scenery, as though they were the letters of an alphabet, into great masterpieces, traditional and spontaneous.<sup>6</sup>

The counterpoint of the sudden stillness of the lapis lazuli's mountain scene suggests a Zen quality in the poem's ending, and Yeats was versed in Zen thought by 1938. He retold in *A Vision* a traditional Zen story told by D.T. Suzuki,<sup>7</sup> and AE confirmed his knowledge of Zen in his review of *The Winding Stair* in 1930.<sup>8</sup>

In 'The Statues', Buddha, when his image was forceful, had replaced the many-faced gods of India:

One image crossed the many-headed, sat  
Under the tropic shade, grew round and slow,  
No Hamlet thin from eating flies, a fat  
Dreamer of the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup>

Buddha's demise as a god was inevitable, for

Empty eyeballs knew  
That knowledge increases unreality, that  
Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show.<sup>10</sup>

A similar idea is implied in 'The Statues':

When gong and conch declare the hour to bless  
Grimalkin crawls to Buddha's emptiness.<sup>11</sup>

Gongs, conchs and other instruments declare the battle's start in the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

the trumpeter  
Blew the great Conch; and, at the noise of it,  
Trumpets and drums, cymbals and gongs and horns  
Burst into sudden clamour...<sup>12</sup>

Yeats, having read the *Gita* many times, would have been aware of the significance of the conch, and its uses. For the idea basically implied in 'The Statues' is that time is cyclical, and one god comes to replace another at the end of an age when the old god's image is exhausted of meaning.

Yeats was himself living in an age when new gods were replacing the old, in a transformation from the Romantic to the Modern. In formulating his own personal philosophy he drew not only on the culture of his native Ireland, but on concepts far removed, on mysticism in the East. One can never claim that any of these influences were dominant, for part of his genius was the assimilation of distant ideas, the paring down of those elements that suited him, and the attempt to marry them to concepts he had derived from his native land.

The last few years have seen a revival of interest in, and social acceptance of, the mystical attitude. Very few Yeats critics have attempted to tackle this area. Many, perhaps, have felt that the recognition of a supernatural world, re-incarnation, and other Eastern concepts of the Universe, is too remote from a 'rational', Post-Christian and 'scientific' age.

Yet for Yeats, as I have attempted to show, the value of Eastern mystical and occult doctrines and symbols depended upon the usefulness they held for him in his pursuit of a personal philosophy. Throughout his life, his work, at each level of life, was fundamentally concerned with the questions of essence and form. His absorption of Eastern influences reflects this. The Japanese Noh, being a matter of form alone, proved a brief, limited influence. The Indian and Arab influences, however, display on Yeats's part, an extended development of essential ideas which he was eventually able to assimilate into his own, personal spiritual philosophy.



# NOTES

## INTRODUCTION

- 1 F.A.C. Wilson, *W.B. Yeats and Tradition* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), p.16.
- 2 W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, reprint 1956), pp.115-16.
- 3 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *West-Eastern Divan* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1914), p.5.
- 4 Matthew Arnold, *The Poems of Matthew Arnold, 1840-1867* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), p.436.

## I THE LORE OF INDIA

- 1 T.L. Dume, *W.B. Yeats: A Survey of his Readings*, unpublished Dissertation (Temple University, Washington, 1950), p.126.
- 2 Naresh Guha, *W.B. Yeats: An Indian Approach* (Calcutta: Jadavpur University, 1968), p.159.
- 3 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests', in *Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute*, eds. A.N. Jeffares and K.G. Cross (London: St Martin's Press, 1965), p.289.
- 4 T.L. Dume, chapter IV.
- 5 W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p.116.
- 6 *Ibid.* p.379.
- 7 *Ibid.* p.375.
- 8 W.B. Yeats, *Explorations* (New York: Collier Books, reprint 1973), p.216.
- 9 W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp.222-3.
- 10 *Ibid.* p.247.
- 11 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests', *op. cit.* p.285. See also Sir John Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom* (London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1888).

- 12 There are various spellings. I have adopted that used by the publisher when referring to a particular edition; otherwise I have chosen the currently accepted spelling, *Bhagavad-Gita*.
- 13 Guha, p.160.
- 14 W.B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1972), p.27.
- 15 Guha, p.160.
- 16 H.R. Bachchan, *W.B. Yeats and Occultism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965), p.25.
- 17 Dume, p.144. Dume is quoting C.L. Wrenn, *William Butler Yeats, A Literary Study* (Durham: 1920), pp.12-13.
- 18 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, eds. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan Company, reprint 1971), p.691.
- 19 *Ibid.* p.694.
- 20 Bachchan, p.16.
- 21 R. Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p.287.
- 22 Bachchan, pp.64-5.
- 23 *Ibid.* p.62.
- 24 *Ibid.* p.63.
- 25 *Ibid.* p.15.
- 26 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, p.682. The editors note that in an earlier edition 'India's' was used in place of 'Asian'.
- 27 Bachchan, p.24. Bachchan is quoting W.B. Yeats, 'The Way of Wisdom', *The Speaker*, 14 April, 1900, p.41.
- 28 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, pp.65-6.
- 29 Bachchan, pp.34-6.
- 30 Guha, pp.63-7.
- 31 'Kauri' means 'seashell' or 'conch' in Sanskrit, and in the *Bhagavad-Gita* warriors blow and call to battle with such shells.
- 32 *Ibid.* p.39.
- 33 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, pp.76-7.

- 34 W.B. Yeats quoted in A.N. Jeffares, *W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet*, Second Edition (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1962), p.33.
- 35 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, pp.723-4.
- 36 *Ibid.* p.102.
- 37 *Ibid.* p.104.
- 38 F.F. Farag, 'Oriental and Celtic Elements in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats', in W.B. Yeats's, 1865-1965: *Centenary Essays on the Art of W.B. Yeats*, eds. D.E.S. Maxwell and S.B. Bushrui (Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1965), p.44.
- 39 W.B. Yeats, *The Wanderings of Oisín and other poems* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1889).
- 40 Jeffares, p.46.
- 41 As indicated by Guha (p.49). The Gunas are three basic characteristics which form any personality. They are the 'three aspects of fundamental Matter, the source for all energy and creative power'; *sattva* (which is equated with harmony and wisdom, intellectual sensitivity and the refinement of self); *rajas* (equated with the active or warrior self and with passion); and *tamas* (equated with darkness, inertia and lethargic self). Bachchan (pp.91-2) suggests that the key to the hidden symbolism of *The Wanderings of Oisín* is the Sephiroth of the Cabbala. This argument is complex in its occult aspects; one wonders whether Yeats would have gone to such lengths merely for the sake of symbolism.
- 42 Guha, pp.50-1.
- 43 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, pp.734-5.
- 44 *Ibid.* p.24.
- 45 Guha, p.54. It is important to note that this was simply Yeats's interpretation of Vedantic thinking, and heavily influenced by Chatterjee. As Shalini Sikka explains, there has been a 'popular Western equation of Eastern with ascetic, world-denying, *maya*, illusory ... in the *Upanisads*, Supreme reality is not a void. It is truth-consciousness-bliss, referred to as *Sat-Cit-Ananda* in Sanskrit. The *Bhagavad-Gita* too, with its doctrine of *Karma-Yoga* (enlightenment through action) does not support the world-as-illusion thesis.' Therefore, rejection of action and asceticism do not fully encompass Hindu thought. See Shalini Sikka, *W.B. Yeats and the Upanisads* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2002), p.14.
- 46 W.B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, p.23.
- 47 Dume, p.138.
- 48 Guha, p.23.
- 49 *Ibid.* p.67.
- 50 Madame Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, reprint 1970), p.368.
- 51 *Ibid.* p.634.
- 52 *Ibid.* p.411.
- 53 Guha, p.70.
- 54 Ellmann, p.291.
- 55 According to Guha (p.71) Yoga is a system of physical, spiritual, and mental discipline for self-development. Hatha Yoga is only its physical aspect.
- 56 *Ibid.* p.31.
- 57 W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, pp.387-90.
- 58 Guha, pp.76-8.
- 59 *Ibid.* p.162.
- 60 Bachchan, p.72.
- 61 W.B. Yeats quoted in *Ibid.*
- 62 *Ibid.* pp.73-6.
- 63 Guha, p.162.
- 64 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, p.450.
- 65 Tagore quoted by Guha, p.80. See also Rabindranath Tagore, *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1958), p.77.
- 66 *Ibid.* p.164.
- 67 *Ibid.* p.120.
- 68 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests', *op. cit.* pp.287-8.
- 69 Guha, p.130.
- 70 *Ibid.* p.128.
- 71 W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p.431. See also Shri Purohit Swami, *An Indian Monk*, Introduction by W.B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1932), p.xx.



- 72 *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, trans. Shri Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats (London: Faber and Faber, 1937).
- 73 H.R. Bachchan (p.154) provides an example. The verses read: 'Ready to start their evolution in this world, they thus come again and again (into the world of creation), following the results of their deeds', as translated by Sri Chandra Vidyarnava. Yeats's version: 'Once more they rise, once more they circle round'.
- 74 *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, p.8.
- 75 *Ibid.*
- 76 *Ibid.* pp.10-11.
- 77 *Ibid.* p.11.
- 78 Reprinted in W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, pp.448-73.
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- 80 Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, pp.476-7.
- 81 *Ibid.* pp.480-1.
- 82 *Ibid.* p.484.
- 83 Guha, p.130.
- 84 Bachchan, pp.156-7.
- 85 *Ibid.* pp.152-3.
- 86 See, for example, the closing verses of *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, pp.158-9.
- 87 W.B. Yeats quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Yeats The Man and the Masks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p.283.
- 88 Guha, p.115.
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- 90 *Ibid.* p.502.
- 91 *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, p.38.
- 92 W.B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, p.150.
- 93 *Ibid.* p.139.
- 94 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, p.837.
- 95 *Ibid.* p.557.
- 96 *Ibid.* p.556.
- 97 *Ibid.* p.555.
- 98 Bachchan, pp.143-5.
- 99 W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p.457.
- 100 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, p.855.
- 101 Bachchan, p.xix.
- 102 *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, eds. Russell K. Alspach and Catherine C. Alspach (New York: Macmillan Company, 1966), p.789.
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- 105 *The Variorum Edition of the Plays*, pp.648-711.
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- 108 According to Bachchan (p.xix): 'Karma: Action which determines the fate of the soul'.
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- 110 *Ibid.* p.637.
- 111 *Ibid.* p.637.
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- 2 *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907-1941*, ed. D.D. Paige (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1971), p.31.
- 3 Taylor, p.53.
- 4 *Ibid.* p.56.
- 5 *Ibid.* p.63.
- 6 *Ibid.* pp.120-31.
- 7 *Ibid.* p.131.
- 8 *Ibid.* pp.140-5.
- 9 *Ibid.* pp.151-3.
- 10 *Ibid.* p.155.
- 11 *Ibid.* p.169.
- 12 *Ibid.* p.175.
- 13 *The Variorum Edition of the Plays*, p.566.
- 14 *Ibid.* p.119.

### III ARABIA ROMANTICA

- 1 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests',  
op. cit. p.281.
- 2 W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p.91.
- 3 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, pp.732-3.
- 4 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests',  
op. cit. p.294.
- 5 *Ibid.* pp.286-7.
- 6 Dume, p.143.
- 7 *Ibid.* p.141. Dume suggests the  
abundance of hair imagery in the poems  
around 1905 might be attributable to  
Hafiz.
- 8 Reprinted in W.B. Yeats, *Essays and  
Introductions*, p.261.
- 9 W.B. Yeats, *Explorations*, pp.301-2.
- 10 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests',  
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- 11 Virginia Moore, *The Unicorn: William Butler  
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- 13 *Ibid.* p.284.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.* p.285.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Sir John Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and  
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- 18 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests',  
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- 19 Bachchan, p.140.
- 20 Jeffares, p.190.
- 21 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests',  
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- 27 *Ibid.* p.300.
- 28 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, p.463.
- 29 Edward Powys Mathers, *The Book of the  
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- 30 *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p.120.
- 31 *Ibid.* p.125.
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- 33 *Ibid.* p.829.
- 34 *Ibid.* p.463.
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- 36 *Ibid.* p.464.
- 37 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests',  
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- 41 *Ibid.*
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- 43 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests',  
op. cit. pp.306-7.
- 44 W.B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, pp.27-8.
- 45 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*,  
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- 46 Dume, p.11.
- 47 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests',  
op. cit. pp.295-6.
- 48 *Ibid.* pp.297-8.
- 49 *Ibid.* pp.295-6.
- 50 See diagram, Appendix II. in Bachchan,  
p.285.
- 51 Both poems were written in 1918. See  
Ellmann, pp.289-90.
- 52 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests',  
op. cit. p.310.
- 53 *Ibid.* pp.309-10.
- 54 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, p.387.
- 55 *Ibid.* p.332.
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- 58 *Ibid.* p.380.
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- 60 S.B. Bushrui, 'Yeats's Arabic Interests',  
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## CONCLUSION

- 1 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, p.565.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid. p.566.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p.454.
- 7 W.B. Yeats, *A Vision*, pp.214-15.
- 8 See also Dume, p.145. Dume comments that AE was in a position to judge Yeats on such a matter.
- 9 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, p.610.
- 10 Ibid. p.610.
- 11 Ibid. p.611.
- 12 *The Song Celestial or Bhagavad-Gita*, trans. Sir Edward Arnold (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1985), pp.4-5.

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